

DEALBOOK NEWSLETTER

College Seniors Prepare to Enter a Work World in Flux

As workplaces transformed by the pandemic negotiate a “new normal,” DealBook asked college seniors across the country what they hope it will look like.

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The white-collar workplace has changed a lot over the last two years. Remote work has gone from a quirky perk to a common experience. Workers all the way up to the C-suite have reassessed what they want from a job. And expectations for when and where work must be done have evolved.

As executives scramble to merge remnants of the “before times” with pandemic-propelled work shifts, graduating college seniors are preparing to enter the work force for the first time. The new normal will be their first normal.

With nearly every aspect of their college experience upended, this year's graduates are more accustomed than most to living alongside uncertainty. The roughly two million people who will earn a bachelor's degree from a U.S. college or university this year pursued academic and professional ambitions amid campus closures, online classes and remote internships.

For better or for worse, they are entering the new work landscape without the memory of prepandemic life to guide or sway their choices.

DealBook spoke to 10 seniors who are graduating from universities across the U.S. about how they envision the trajectory of their careers — where they'll work, how they'll work and what factors might influence their choices. Their goals, interests and outlooks vary, but nearly all anticipate careers that are less linear and more dynamic than those of generations prior.

And they're ready for it. “I don't care too much about change. It happens,” said Austin Rosas, 23, a Texas A&M University economics major with a minor in mathematics. “Adaptation is what matters.”

Values matter

Salaries and benefits are important. But for a growing number of younger workers, a company's culture and values are at least as important as individual compensation.

In a survey commissioned last year by the software firm Atlassian, 61 percent of millennial workers in the U.S. — currently the largest generation in the work force — said they preferred companies that take a stand on social issues, and 49 percent said they would quit a job that did not align with their values, both significant increases from the year before.

Chief among those values are diversity and inclusiveness. The National Association of Colleges and Employers surveys graduates every year about what they're looking for in an employer. The percentage of respondents who say that a company's diversity is important or extremely important to them has grown every year since 2015, with 71.8 percent of this year's students calling it a top priority, Andrea Koncz, the association's research manager, said.

- **“In addition to values, the impact that an organization has will make or break my decision to begin and remain working in a particular place.”**— *Citlali Blanco, 22, human biology major at Stanford University*
- **“I hope my future workplace is an environment that is collaborative, inclusive and values their employees. I want a workplace where I feel safe and comfortable to share my voice, as well as a place where I will be able to continue and grow in the field I want to succeed in.”**— *Rebecca Hart, 22, public relations and strategic communications major at American University*
- **“My workplace will likely be within either a hospital or medical office, where I hope to see even greater equity between men and women in positions of leadership. I also hope that my workplace will be wholly inclusive and represent a diverse array of individuals, both among my colleagues and with the patients we serve each day.”**— *Selena Zhang, 21, computational biology major at Brown University*



Sidney Stull at an outdoor classroom amphitheater at Boise State University in Idaho on Friday. Ellen Hansen for The New York Times

Office hours

The sort of knowledge-based tasks referred to as “office work” no longer must be done in an office. In the next few years, the number of people in the U.S. who do most or all of their job from a remote location is expected to surpass 36 million, said Johnny C. Taylor, chief executive officer at the Society for Human Resource Management — double the prepandemic number.

What that looks like for every industry, company and team is in flux, often driven by employees who want to continue some of the benefits of the remote schedules imposed at the start of the pandemic. Hybrid schedules, flex schedules and work-where-you-want policies will play a much larger role in this generation's careers.

- **“While I am really hoping to work in an office, I want it to be a fun one, an office where they expect me to show up on time and get my work done but allow me the freedom to be creative in my work and work space. I definitely want to work full-time. I love being almost too busy.”**— *Sidney Stull, 21, communications major at Boise State University*
- **“As someone who works in tech, I’ve largely accepted that most of my work will be done at a desk in front of a screen. On one hand, I’m excited to see all the valuable serendipitous ideas and eureka moments that have long been promised to me. On the other, I find creative work to be quite a vulnerable process, and often appreciate being at home to explore whatever I’m thinking about.”**— *Oliver Feuerhahn, 21, business and social science major at Minerva University*
- **“Since I will be starting as an investment banking analyst, I expect that I will be in an office working full-time as per the industry standards. While this work setting may have fallen out of favor with other members of my generation, I honestly am looking forward to the opportunity.”**— *Costa Kosmidis, 22, finance major at Fordham University*

One job vs. many gigs

With pay lagging behind inflation, making ends meet is harder today than it was a generation ago. The percentage of U.S. workers holding more than one job at a time has grown steadily over the last decade, according to census data. Less-formal surveys have found that younger workers are more likely than older colleagues to have a side hustle or second job. Nearly half of millennial respondents to a 2018 survey by the financial services company Bankrate said they worked a paid second gig at least some of the time. (Those surveys don’t count unpaid caregiving.)

But a full-time job is just that. Some industries — notably finance — still put early-career employees on schedules that leave hardly enough time to shower and sleep, let alone to clock in somewhere else.

- **“I see myself maybe doing consulting on the side. It is increasingly difficult nowadays to sustain one’s desired lifestyle without multiple streams of income, so that is something I have in the back of my mind.”**— *Sidney Stull*
- **“I don’t expect to hold more than one job at a time. I’d rather hold a single full-time job that I’m super invested in.”**— *Abby Mapes, 22, computer science major at Duke University*
- **“I can’t imagine that I could stand that. I really care about time away from work and being able to spend time with people that I care about. Most importantly I want a work environment that will give me flexible hours to spend with my family, whenever that happens down the line.”**— *Wylie Greeson, 21, environmental geoscience and English major at The College of Wooster*



Oliver Feuerhahn in San Francisco. He attends Minerva University and will be entering the workforce this summer. Aaron Wojack for The New York Times

Multiple careers

The accelerating pace of technological change gives birth to new fields and industries as fast as it demolishes old ones. A company or industry that's thriving at graduation time may barely exist 20 years later. Couple that with longer life spans, and the likelihood that a current graduate will go through multiple careers in a lifetime is even higher.

- **“I really hope to have multiple careers. Realistically, I know I’ll work in a traditional-ish job until 30. Hopefully, I can shift my meaning of ‘work’ into something more project-based by 40. And by 50, start focusing on other enjoyable things in life. I think I’ll always want to contribute to interesting businesses as long as I can, but also don’t feel the need to absorb too much stress in the process.”— Oliver Feuerhahn**
- **“Even deciding what I wanted to pursue after graduation was difficult for me, so I don’t expect to work in the same field for the entirety of my career. Being able to learn and grow by doing is what drives me, and moving forward for me is about adapting and embracing new challenges through creative thinking.”— Amy Liu, 21, economics major at the University of California, Los Angeles**
- **“I certainly hope I don’t! I think one of the great opportunities of life is to be able to go out and do so many things and gain so many experiences. I feel like I wouldn’t be living my life to its fullest if I did one job my entire career.”— Wylie Greeson**

Retirement?

This generation likely won't retire in the way their grandparents or great-grandparents did, both by need and by choice. Though many older workers have been pushed to retire prematurely during the pandemic, the trend toward longer life spans and the decline of cushy pensions will likely lengthen working lives.

This doesn't have to be an arduous slog. A report released by the Stanford Center on Longevity last year called for careers to be paced differently, so that people work for more years, but with fewer work days in the week and fewer hours in the day.

- **“I expect to work until my mid-50s. I think I’ll always want to have something to do, but I see myself moving away from working full-time in an office in my mid-50s or early 60s.”— Abby Mapes**
- **“I genuinely believe that if I’m still able to produce up-to-par work that supports my team and my career brings me happiness, then I’ll keep working past the golden years of retirement.”— Amy Liu**
- **“I expect to work as long as I am stimulated from my work. If it lasts 10 years or the rest of my life, then so be it.”— Austin Rosas**



Citlali Blanco in Stanford, Calif. Aaron Wojack for The New York Times

Surprises ahead

This year’s new hires have seen firsthand how quickly the world can change. It’s no surprise that most of them expect to see major shifts in companies during their careers.

Some of these are already underway. As burnout and exhaustion have pushed workers to resign in droves, more companies are accelerating efforts to factor employee well-being into organizational productivity. Experiments around the world in a four-day workweek have proved both popular with workers and profitable for employers.

- **“I’m excited for employees to be viewed more holistically, with mental, social, and physical needs that affect performance. It would be great to see workplaces promote community-building, adequate nutrition, environmental sustainability, fitness, and stress reduction. This would markedly improve the lives of so many people.”— Citlali Blanco**
- **“I hope a four-day workweek becomes standard, and I hope that putting more of an emphasis on mental, emotional, and social health starts to prevail in the work force.”— Wylie Greeson**
- **“I see the workplace becoming a lot more collaborative as the years go on. I see a breakdown of hierarchy that leads to a more team based organizational structure. I think this will be beneficial, not only for the work at hand but for the people doing the work.”— Sidney Stull**

What do you think? Let us know: dealbook@nytimes.com.